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COURAGE TO STAND

JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE
FOR POST-CHRISTIAN TIMES

PHILIP GRAHAM RYKEN



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Courage to Stand

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CONTENTS

PREFACE	7
INTRODUCTION: JEREMIAH'S TIMES AND OUR TIMES	9
1. GOD FILES FOR DIVORCE	13
2. A GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND	29
3. AT THE CROSSROADS	43
4. WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS NOW IS REFORMATION!	55
5. SOMETHING TO BOAST ABOUT	69
6. THE SCARECROW IN THE MELON PATCH	83
7. IN THE POTTER'S HANDS	97
8. DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL	109
9. THE BEST LAID PLANS	123
10. THE NEW COVENANT	137
11. BUYER'S MARKET	153
12. BOOK BURNING	167
13. BRANDS FROM THE BURNING	181
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS	195
NOTES	199
GENERAL INDEX	204
SCRIPTURE INDEX	207



PREFACE

This book is intended to be a practical introduction to the teaching of Jeremiah. I have tried to select some of the prophet's main themes and familiar sayings without losing the thread of his life experience. Small groups and Sunday school classes that wish to use this book will find questions for discussion for each chapter on page 197. Individuals would also find these questions helpful in applying the truths set forth in this book to their lives.

Many thanks must be given for the completion of this book. The Reverend Bob Harvey first awakened my interest in Jeremiah. I thank the session, congregation and staff of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for their prayers, encouragement and assistance. I also thank the editorial staff at P&R for helping to bring this book back into print. Most of all, I give thanks to Lisa and the children for the joy they bring to life.

This book is dedicated with gratitude for my grandparents: Albert and Florence Graham, and Frank and Eva Ryken. May God give us grace to live in our times the honorable way they have lived and still live in theirs.



INTRODUCTION

JEREMIAH'S TIMES AND OUR TIMES

The rabbis called him the “Weeping Prophet.” They said he began wailing the moment he was born.

When Michelangelo painted him on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he presented him in a posture of despair. He looks like a man who has wept so long he has no tears left to shed. His face is turned to one side, like a man who has received the blows of many troubles. His shoulders are hunched forward, weighed down by the sins of Judah. His eyes also are cast down, as if he can no longer bear to see God’s people suffer. His hand covers his mouth. Perhaps he has nothing left to say.

His name was Jeremiah. He labored as God’s prophet for forty years or more, from 627 to some time after 586 B.C. Four decades is a long time to be a weeping prophet.

Jeremiah lived when Israel was tossed among three super-powers: Assyria to the north, Egypt to the south, and Babylon to the east. He served—and suffered—through the administrations of three kings: Josiah the reformer, Jehoiakim the despot, and Zedekiah the puppet. He was prophet during the cold November winds of Judah’s life as a nation, right up to the time God’s people were deported to Babylon. Jeremiah himself was exiled to Egypt, where he died.

When the indomitable Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984) exam-

ined Jeremiah's ministry back in the 1960s, he identified him as a prophet for post-Christian times. "Jeremiah," he wrote, "provides us with an extended study of an era like our own, where men have turned away from God and society has become post-Christian."¹

The analogy is a good one. Jeremiah's culture was not post-Christian, of course, since Jesus Christ had not yet come into the world. But he lived in a time when people had stopped trusting God. Public life was increasingly dominated by pagan ideas and practices. People still met their religious obligations, but they did so out of duty rather than devotion.

In much the same way, Christianity has lost its cultural influence in the West. With his usual perception, C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) observed, "Whereas all history was for our ancestors divided into two periods, the pre-Christian and the Christian, and two only, for us it falls into three—the pre-Christian, the Christian, and what may reasonably be called the Post-Christian."² Recent decades have only served to confirm Lewis's analysis. Many people still go to church, but it hardly matters, to them or to anyone else. There are still Christians, of course, but religion has been excluded from the public square. The twenty-first century thus dawns on a post-Christian America.

How does a Christian live for Christ in a post-Christian culture? The ministry of Jeremiah holds some answers. His courage, his passion, his preaching, even his sufferings show how to live for God when everyone else turns against him. Jeremiah is a prophet for pagan times.

Living for Christ in the twenty-first century begins with recognizing God's personal call to live in these times. Jeremiah did not choose to become a weeping prophet. God chose him: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5). In the same way, the Christian's call to faith

and obedience pre-dates his or her existence. God not only knows what he is doing with your life, he always has known. He chose you to love and serve him even before you were conceived.

With God's calling comes God's gifting. Jeremiah was not sure he was up to the challenge of reaching his culture. "Ah, Sovereign LORD," he said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child" (1:6). It is tempting to refuse the call when God's work seems too difficult.

This kind of objection, however, has never been persuasive to God. Jeremiah did not get any farther with it than Moses did:

But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD.

Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." (1:7-10)

Not everyone is called to do what Jeremiah did. Every spiritual calling is unique. But the principle holds true: God empowers his servants to do whatever he calls them to do.

God has called and gifted you to serve him at exactly this moment in human history. Jeremiah's example gives strong encouragement to live for Christ in pagan times. At the end of his commissioning, Jeremiah received a promise that applies to every one of God's servants:

"Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pil-

lar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the LORD.

(1:17-19)

CHAPTER 1

GOD FILES
FOR DIVORCE

*“If a man divorces his wife and she leaves him
and marries another man,
should he return to her again?
Would not the land be completely defiled?
But you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers—
would you now return to me?”
declares the LORD.*

JEREMIAH 3:1

I walked past the notice board on the street and I was shocked by my own sermon title, chosen some weeks before: “God Files for Divorce.” I ran up to my office and pulled out a Bible to make sure I had it right. God files for *divorce*? Can it be true? Would the God of the eternal covenant end his marriage to his own people?

Yes, he would: “Therefore I bring charges against you again,” declares the LORD” (2:9). The honeymoon is over. God is taking his people to divorce court. Jeremiah 2 is his legal testimony.

THE HONEYMOON

God remembers what the honeymoon was like. He pages through the photos in his wedding album. As he looks back on

the early days of his marriage, there is an ache in his heart. He can remember how his bride adored him when they were first married. “I remember,” he testifies, “the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me” (2:2).

God is on the witness stand in the agony of love, the kind of agony Sheldon Vanauken describes in his book *A Severe Mercy*:

To hold her in my arms against the twilight and be her comrade for ever—this was all I wanted so long as my life should last. . . . And this, I told myself with a kind of wonder, this was what love was: this consecration, this curious uplifting, this sudden inexplicable joy, and this intolerable pain.¹

Once Israel loved God like a newlywed. Wives should take careful note of Jeremiah’s picture of the devoted wife. Actually, the word *devotion* is not strong enough! God remembers the *chesed*, or covenant faithfulness of Israel. This is a word for unbroken promises, unshakable loyalty, unceasing devotion, and unfailing lovingkindness. It is the perfect word to describe marriage because marriage is a covenant relationship. It is more than just a legal contract; it is a steadfast love commitment of fidelity and adoration.

Christians sometimes get the idea that being faithful to God’s covenant is simply a matter of obeying God’s law. This is because we are legalists at heart. But God never intended our relationship with him to be mere obedience of the will. God wants our hearts as well as our wills. Redemption is a romance.

The children of Israel gave their hearts to God when they first got married. They reveled in the romance of redemption. Like a newly-married bride, Israel loved her divine husband. The proof of her love was following God wherever he led. “Through the desert, through a land not sown” (2:2), this bride submitted to the guidance of her husband. Israel was young and in love, and all she wanted was to be close to her husband. Barren wilderness was not much of a bridal suite, but that didn’t mat-

ter! Israel followed God out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land (2:6-7).

If Israel was a loving wife, God was a faithful husband. He did not fail to keep any of his wedding vows. Here husbands ought to take careful note of Jeremiah's picture of the perfect husband.

God had *passion* for his bride. "Israel was holy to the LORD, the firstfruits of his harvest" (2:3a). He took her to love and to cherish. He treated her with honor and respect, setting her apart as holy. Israel was the firstfruits of God's harvest among the nations of the world. She was God's best and most valuable possession, the apple of his eye, dedicated to him alone.

So God *protected* his bride. He would not allow anyone else to taste his fruit. "All who devoured her were held guilty, and disaster overtook them" (2:3b). If anyone threatened Israel or encroached on her territory, God treated it as an attack on his own person. Remember what happened to the Egyptians? Or the Philistines? God saved his wife and kept her safe.

Then God *provided* for his bride: "I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce" (2:7). God gave Israel a beautiful home. There was plenty of food in the fridge—mostly milk and honey—and fine bone china on the table.

THE GROUNDS FOR DIVORCE

That was then, but this is now. Time to wake up and smell the burnt toast. The honeymoon is over. My wife and I decided our honeymoon was over when the no-stick frying pan we bought when we first got married started to stick. Well, in Jeremiah 2 the frying pan is sticking like the floor of a movie theater.

How could this be happening? If you were there for the nuptials, when Jerusalem was espoused to God, you never would have believed it would all end in divorce. The wedding was so beautiful! The honeymoon was so wonderful! The bride was so

devoted! The husband was so faithful! Where did it all go wrong?

God is on the witness stand in divorce court asking the same question: “What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me?” (2:5; cf. 2:31). God did not leave his people, they dumped him. God’s people are the ones who have walked out on the marriage. They used to love him, but it’s all over now. This is worth remembering whenever God seems distant. As the saying goes, “If God does not seem close, who moved?”

Why would anyone ever move away from God? It makes no sense! Why would a bride leave a perfect husband? Why would she abandon a man who fulfilled all his vows to her? There is no explanation, no excuse. God’s bride separated from her husband without the slightest provocation.

God is the one who has been wronged. He is the plaintiff, and this is his accusation: “They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves” (2:5). This is the only legitimate ground for divorce: adultery (cf. Matt. 5:32). In this case, the adultery is spiritual. God’s people have been having affairs with “worthless” idols. This is the same word used in Ecclesiastes for vanity (*hebel*). It means “mist” or “vapor.” Idolaters grasp at thin air. Actually, they worship nothing at all.

So the marriage is dying of neglect. God’s people no longer seek after God. They no longer say, “Where is the LORD?” (2:6). They no longer recount and recite the mighty acts of salvation. They forget the love that saved them. They suffer from self-induced spiritual amnesia.

This is a reminder for Christians to thank God daily for salvation in Jesus Christ. Recount and recite the saving acts of God in history. Remember what God has done in your life. The road to spiritual adultery begins when you stop reveling in the love of God. Few Christians plan to fall into grievous sin. It is only after falling that they realize they have drifted away from the God of love.

Jeremiah places the blame for Jerusalem's marital difficulties squarely on the shoulders of its spiritual leaders:

*“The priests did not ask, ‘Where is the LORD?’
Those who deal with the law did not know me;
the leaders rebelled against me.
The prophets prophesied by Baal,
following worthless idols.” (2:8)*

The prophets, priests, and kings were not part of the solution; they were part of the problem. “As a thief is disgraced when he is caught, so the house of Israel is disgraced—they, their kings and their officials, their priests and their prophets” (2:26). The leaders got caught with their hands in the cookie jar. They were committing secret sins. Like everyone else, they were sleeping around with idols.

The middle of verse 8 ought to keep ministers and other spiritual leaders awake at night: “Those who deal with the law did not know me.” A holy calling does not make a holy man. The priests of Jeremiah's day were handling the Scriptures, studying the Bible, and teaching God's Word, but they did not *know* God himself (cf. John 5:39-40). Their ministry was a dead ritual rather than a living relationship.

THE EVIDENCE

Jeremiah 2 does not describe a situation of “irreconcilable differences.” This is not a no-fault divorce. God has legitimate grounds for terminating the marriage.

The rest of the chapter gives evidence of the infidelity of God's people. It is like a judicial slide show. As part of his prosecution, God introduces into evidence image after image of spiritual adultery. He lays out his case with the logic of a lawyer and the longing of a lover, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that his people have forsaken their first love.